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## FREE THOUGHT IN AMERICA.

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THERE is a notion even in refined circles in America that the influence of a man like Colonel Robert Ingersoll may be an influence for good. I altogether fail to see it. While doing full justice to the honesty, the courage, and the good humor of this remarkable orator, I am convinced that he is precisely the sort of teacher—I had almost written devil's advocate—to whom Americans should just now shut their ears. Free thought should be distinguished from the offenses against common intelligence committed by a Philistine of the Philistines. Ingersoll enters the temples of religion with his hat on one side, a cigar in his mouth, and a jest upon his lips. No matter who the god may be,—Vishnu, Buddha, Apollo, or Jesus,—he is ready to tackle him in his own peculiar vocabulary. His philosophy may be summed up in the words of Burns:

“To keep a cozy fireside clean  
For weans and wife—  
That's the true pathos and sublime  
O' human life!”

This philosophy is all very well in its way, just as well as eating and drinking, dancing, marrying and giving in marriage, and infant-dandling; but if it were all-sufficient, George the Third would have been a great king, and Voltaire would have been a great poet. To take Colonel Ingersoll seriously, of course, would be like asking for reverence from Mark Twain. He represents the natural reaction of American Bohemianism against the Puritanism of Boston and the overstrained transcendentalism of Brook Farm. But he is just the sort of person of whom America does not stand in need. The predominant vices of America, especially as represented by its great cities, are its irreverence, its recklessness, its impatience—in one

word, its materialism. A nation in which the artistic sense is almost dead, which is practically without a literature, which is impatient of all sanctions and indifferent to all religions, which is corrupt from the highest pinnacle of its public life down to the lowest depth of its primalism, which is at once thin-skin'd under criticism and aggressive to criticise, which worships material forces in every shape and form, which despises conventional conditions, yet is slavish to ignoble fashions, which, too hasty to think for itself, takes recklessly at second-hand any old- or new-clothes philosophy that may be imported from Europe, yet, while wearing the raiment openly, mocks and ridicules the civilization that wove the fabric — such a nation, I think, might be spared the spectacle of an elderly gentleman in modern costume trampling on the lotus, the rose, and the lily in the gardens of the gods. The exhibition can do no good; it may do no little harm. If the science of mythology did not exist, if the old gods or the new had any bloody altars left, if the tongue of free thought had not been loosened once and forever, it might be another matter; but the danger now is, not that men may believe too much, but that they may believe too little; that in due time skepticism, which has demolished all religions and fatally discredited the divine religion of poetry itself, may turn the temple of mystery into a bear-garden or a beer-garden, exchange the language of literature for the argot of the cheap press, and Americanize even the sentiment of humanity. “I beg to remind honorable gentlemen,” said Benjamin Disraeli, on a memorable occasion, “that we owe much to the Jews.” I beg to remind the Colonel Ingersolls and Mark Twains of this continent that we owe much to the gods, without whom, when all is said and done,

“The world would smell like what it is — a tomb!”

But for them, Europe would have been Americanized long ago; but for them, Europe would have arrived centuries since at the blessed era of presidential elections, colossal public swindles, races for money-bags, the torturing rack of the interviewer, and the inquisition of the newspaper; but for them, but for the divine tyrants and instructors of mankind, malignant or benignant, terrible or beautiful, the pessimism of Schopenhauer and Leopardi might have been antedated a thousand years. For my

own part, I should prefer even to accept hell with John Calvin, rather than to eat cakes, drink ale, and munch hot ginger with Colonel Ingersoll. He is the boy in the gallery, cracking nuts and making precocious comments during the performance of the tragedy of life; blind to the splendor of the scenery, deaf to the beauty of the dialogue, indifferent to the pathetic or tragic solicitations of the players; seeing in Christ or Buddha or Jehovah only a leading man spouting platitudes, and indifferently dressed for the part he is playing. A great mythus is to him a great "lie," nothing more; a great poetical theology is only an invention of the arch-enemy. Hugely does he enjoy the joke of the garden of Eden or the tree of Igdrassil; clearly does he perceive, having hung round the stage-door of the world, that the goddesses are only ballet-girls, exhibiting their nudity for so much a night. For him Æschylus has no terror, Sophocles no charm, the author of the Book of Job no pathos; everything is leather-and-prunella, except the performance of Harlequin.

That such a person should have a large following, among a generation so much of his way of thinking, is no matter for surprise; a few centuries ago it might have been a cause for joy; but in the nineteenth century it is truly sad, as showing how little science has done, after all, to elevate the intellectual condition of the masses. The same uninstructed influence that is thus brought to bear upon religion would speedily be fatal, and already, as I have suggested, threatens to be fatal to all poetry, all true literature, all great art, and, in the long run, all speculative science. Colonel Ingersoll is very fond of proclaiming his admiration for the great scientific teachers of the age; but in reality he is as far away in spirit from the thought of Darwin as from the vision of Shakespeare, as obtuse to the scientific problems as to the pathetic poetic fallacy. Religion is the grave, elder daughter of Poetry, and to understand religious questions a man must have the heart of a poet. Science, too, is the daughter of Poetry; indeed, her youngest born; while calmer and colder than her mother, she has the same far-away, wrapt look into the heaven of heavens; and her teaching is for poetic hearts also, not for those who confound her with her sordid and hardworking handmaid, Invention. Science ranges the universe, reaches the farthest suns, reaches the farthest cloud confines, and cries honestly and loudly, "Thus far—no farther—here I pause"; and then even she begins to dream. Invention

squats on the ground, sets her little water-wheel, lights her little lamp, pieces her mechanical puzzles, does homely work, delightful and useful to everybody. But Invention-worship is fetish-worship, and Colonel Ingersoll is a fetish-worshiper—that is to say, an individual exactly at the savage stage where neither religion nor science begins. To go to him for religious guidance, is like asking a native of the kingdom of Dahomey to favor us with his ideas on Free-will, the Incarnation, the philosophy of Plato, the art of Raphael, the poetry of Æschylus, the music of Beethoven, and the positive philosophy of Comte or Spencer.

The Christian stage, whatever objection we may take to it, is higher than the fetish-stage, and the lowest form of anthropomorphism is infinitely superior to totem-worship. The mass of mankind do not need to be told that it is well to fill their bellies, to love their children, to live amicably with one another, to accept no guidance but their own very questionable “common-sense”; all that is taught to them of right and of necessity by the conditions of that period of evolution which they have already attained. What they require to learn is, that life necessitates divine sanctions as well as cheery conditions; that the gods are not dead, but living, imperishable ideals fashioned by the sublimest and supremest conceptions of mankind; that the truth of any religion lies not in its dogma, but in its moral beauty or poetical imperishability, because just so far as it is beautiful is it fundamentally and actually true; that our sharpest hours of suffering contain our clearest moments of insight; and that human love and sympathy are born, not of common junketing, but of common despair and sorrow. The gospel of hot ginger, as preached by Colonel Ingersoll, would soon make of New York another Sodom. Fortunately, such a man as Octavius Frothingham is hard by to vindicate the poetry of religion against the champions of cakes and ale, and to prove that free thought, even in America, does not necessarily imply free permission to outrage your neighbor’s most sacred convictions.

Mr. Frothingham is well known to most readers of this REVIEW as one of the most brilliant and enlightened apostles of free thought or radical religion in America. Until quite lately, I believe, he preached every Sunday in New York; with the field of his present labors I am unacquainted; but my knowledge of him is altogether based on his writings and on

Mr. Stedman's little monograph — one of those admirably lucid bits of crystallization for which the writer is distinguished. Of course, a man educated like myself in the school of English Jacobinism finds in Mr. Frothingham a not very novel type of thinker, uttering sentiments with which the world of free thought has long been familiar; but the author of "*Transcendentalism in New England*" has a distinct individuality, often perfervid, occasionally convincing, and never tiresome. His style is admirable, even where his matter is questionable, as it now and then is; and, on the whole, America is to be congratulated on the privilege of listening to such a man. But does America listen to him? It would very much astonish me to hear that it did. His faith is far too filmy, his foothold much too unsteady, to carry conviction to the hearts of a hasty generation. His tolerance to all religions, all opinions, all orthodoxies and heresies, is beautiful and welcome, but his infinite patience lacks, to my mind, the shaping power of conviction. He has set his soul free of every bond and shackle, but he leaves it to beat the empty air. With all this, it must be clearly understood that his written works have the highest of all literary merits, that of directly stimulating thought in the reader; they are full of grave, wise, tender, even profound things, expressed in perfect language; they are reverent to the very extremes of their gentle audacity; and there can be no doubt whatever that they have had a deeply beneficent influence whenever and wherever they have been studied. But the fatal spirit of a self-destructive latitudinarianism, which has paralyzed the will of every transcendentalist from Hegel downward, possesses Mr. Frothingham also. His message to men carries no conviction, for it has neither the hate of hate nor the love of love; it lacks the fertilizing energy and superb bigotry of a logical belief.

Mr. Frothingham, for example, utterly repudiates anthropomorphism. The universe, in his conception, is as it was to Springer, as it has been to every true transcendentalist, a system of universal law, entirely divorced from personality. From one point of view, this conception is rational and impregnable; from another, it is inexpedient, not to say trivial. No sane man doubts the profundity of the current ideas on which Mr. Frothingham sails so cheerfully; of the "stream of tendency" and the "power beyond ourselves which works for righteousness"; but many men doubt, as I do, the scientific necessity, or

the mental possibility, of divorcing the idea of God from the idea of personality. The poetical image of the magnified non-natural man at least hits the mark better than the preposterous images of "streams" and "tendencies" and impersonal working "powers" beyond humanity. Very instructive it is to observe, in this connection, how the apostle of blind law, taken off his guard, appropriates the anthropomorphic metaphors :

"The Radical has no definition ; he does not venture on a written definition. He will not define or confine the infinite. He has no interpretation which he can accept or impose upon anybody else ; but the substance of the idea he holds in a manner so transcendental, grand, vast, and beautiful that the others dwarf themselves into utter insignificance. The Hebrew Jehovah seems to him a fanciful and fantastical idea ; the Christian's triune deity is limited ; and the theist's conception of the personal God is bounded. The Radical believes in the universal law, omnipotent, omnipresent, sweeping through the world, administering the least things, controlling the greatest, holding close relations between you and me, holding in the hollow of its hand all the affairs of all the nations of the globe. This idea of law—material, intellectual, spiritual—comprehends everything, all the domain of reason, all the domain of hope, so vast that no faith can scale its heights, so tender that one can lie like a child on its bosom, so mighty and majestic that nobody need be afraid that it cannot overcome every obstacle in the way of the highest and noblest advance." ("The Mission of the Radical Preacher," by O. B. Frothingham.)

Which, after all, is the most illogical and fantastic, the idea of a Hebrew Jehovah, or of a Christian triune deity, or the picture of a universal law that "administers" and "controls," holds affairs in "the hollow of its hand," and is so "tender that one can lie like a child on its bosom"? Every one admits that God, in the absolute, is unknowable and inconceivable ; but the consensus of human experience has established that the only image that can represent his relation to conditioned creatures is the human or anthropomorphic one, though it has made modern scientists so angry. After all, is not the rejection of the popular image made in the most "crass" spirit of transcendentalism? Where is the wisdom of a criticism that would endow blind law with "hands" and a "bosom," and in the same breath object to the terminology of the Lord's Prayer?

Elsewhere in the same book from which I have quoted, Mr. Frothingham's language becomes less contradictory, but even more extraordinary—so extraordinary, indeed, that, if it came from any other pen, one might presume that the writer had no

spiritual claim to speak *in cathedra* on religious topics at all. In proclaiming his revolt from the Christian religion, and his rejection of the Christian idea, he admits, regretfully, that the Christian faith still prevails, that it keeps alive the potent activities that sustain the life of Christendom. Nevertheless, he adds, "it is a superstition; it is not grounded on history, on knowledge, on science, on fact, but it is a fancy, an imagination, a tradition"; and now, in the natural course of things, it is dissolving away before the breath of science. People, he naïvely affirms, reject it in the great centers of activity — in Paris, in Berlin, in London, in New York! Among other reasons for the long permanence of this false faith, and its still surviving power, he gives the following: 1. The exceeding antiquity of the system; 2. The hindrances so long thrown in the way of Biblical criticism; 3. *Mirabile dictu*, the persistence with which the faith is taught. The last reason is a superb *non sequitur*; it is simply affirming that the zeal with which an army fights its battles is in direct ratio to the weakness of its cause. But, not content with so wonderful an affirmation, Mr. Frothingham goes on to arraign Christianity because it is the "religion of sorrow." He quotes both Jesus and Paul in illustration of his statement. Then he adds, not without eloquence:

"Through the chinks we can see the light. The condition of man becomes more comfortable, more easy; the hope of man is more visible; the endeavor of man is more often crowned with success; the attempt to solve the darkest life-problems is not so desperate as it was. The reformer meets with fewer rebuffs; the philanthropist does not despair as he did. The light is dawning. The great teachers of knowledge multiply, bear their burdens more and more steadily; the traditions of truth and knowledge are becoming established in the intellectual world. It is so; and those of us who have caught a vision of the better times coming through reason, through knowledge, through manly and womanly endeavor, have caught a sight of a Christendom passing away, of a religion of sorrow declining, of a gospel preached for the poor no longer useful to a world that is mastering its own problems of poverty and lifting itself out of disabling misery into wealth without angelic assistance. This is our consolation; and while we admit, clearly and frankly, the real power of the popular faith, we also see the pillars on which a new faith rests, which shall be a faith not of sorrow, but of joy." ("The Rising and the Setting Faith, and other Discourses," by O. B. Frothingham.)

Is it necessary to demolish this cumbrous snow-heap of misconception, to point out the fallacy that confuses the Christian



sentiment with the utilitarian philosophy of loaves and fishes? If all that Jesus meant was that the poor should become the rich in another world, and the suffering become the joyful; if the kernel of his teaching was merely, as narrow logicians have suggested, the notion that bad luck here would of necessity insure a bonus elsewhere, Christianity would stand but a poor chance at the hands of either the higher or the lower criticism. What Jesus did teach, or what we have learned at least by the divine ideal that he afforded, was, and is, that worldly knowledge, worldly prosperity, worldly success and happiness, are poor things compared with the heaven of sin vanquished, the other world of supreme love and insight. If the triumph of the political economist were quite secure; if the earth were equally divided among men according to some such scheme as that of Henry George; if there were no work-houses in it, and no prisons, the poor would still inherit the kingdom of heaven; for the true poor of the Christian idea are those who despise ignoble prizes, who are indifferent to vain knowledge, who have found in the certainty of human failure the sublimity of sympathetic love and insight. It must be borne in mind, too, that Jesus could sit down with the rich man as well as the poor, when the rich man was poor "in spirit." To refute Mr. Frothingham here would be to refute the whole argument of utilitarianism, which has already been done, or attempted, and is of course far beyond the scope of this paper; nor am I in any way holding a brief for the Christian religion, or speaking from the point of view of the orthodox believer. But let us have fair play on both sides, nor attempt to answer the proposition that one may be multiplied into three by an assertion that two and two are four. Elsewhere Mr. Frothingham clearly expresses his conviction that perfect happiness is simply impossible under mundane conditions, and that mere knowledge and power may be, and generally are, in the nature of vanity. As long as these things are true, there is room in our dialectics for the Christian argument that the compensations of a higher and nobler life are precisely what is needed for the settlement of the complex human problem. It is so melancholy to find a thinker like Mr. Frothingham, among Americans, of all people in the world, arguing that there is to be a millennium of inexhaustible dry goods and of physical prosperity, compared with which the coming of the Messiah would be but an ineffective performance.

Mr. Frothingham writes very eloquently on evolution; accepts all its splendid suggestions, both in the material and in the moral world; shows clearly that cause follows effect in the social as well as the physical sphere, and that out of evil must come evil, and out of good must issue good. He accepts, if I understand him rightly, the Comtist notion of the perfectibility of humanity, and infinitely prefers the *Grand Être*, or divine administration of the genius of man, to either Jehovah or Jesus, Buddha or Balder. He does not, however, imitate Colonel Ingersoll in treating any of these gods with disrespect, but he nevertheless measures them with his free-thought foot-rule, and finds them, at the best, only a cubit high. What, after all, is this *Grand Être* of which we hear so much? Not the Son of Man transubstantiated, but the Spirit of Man glorified; not the Paraclete, the Redeemer, or the Divine Ideal, but the vague, impersonal, stupendous, and overpowering outcome of all human intelligence, effort, suffering, limitless struggle, and despair. His other names are Science, Knowledge, Intellectual Victory, Moral Supremacy; his other name will be Happiness, or *Summum Bonum*, by and by. Well, when our *Grand Être* looks forward, what will be his prospect? A reign of indefinite but not endless length, cut short inevitably, sooner or later, by the cataclysm of our solar system. In the far future, then, inevitable Death. When he looks backward, what must be his retrospect? Far away as the first beginnings of life he traces the progression from pain to pain, marks the graves of the generations, from the tomb of the pterodactyl in the chalk to the sepulchre of Franklin among the Arctic snows. Far backward, then, Death too; æons of agony, vistas of the types that have perished to fashion the *Grand Être* for his short ecstastic reign. Science may smile at the thought of compensation; but surely the *Grand Être*, with his supreme potentialities of pity, must say to himself, "Alas and alas! though my children now rejoice like motes in the sunbeam, what of those who have been destroyed, tortured, and obliterated in the long darkness that preceded this splendid dawn of day?" And so, after all, the *Grand Être*, with all his good intentions, finds his poor feet slipping and sinking in the arid sands of pessimism, and the only gospel left for his worshipers to preach will be the old weary gospel of the materialist, "Eat, drink, and be happy, for to-morrow we die!"

But to do Mr. Frothingham justice, he is not a pessimist. In one of the very finest of his essays, the sermon on "Immortality," a piece of writing that can be read and re-read for its marvelous clearness of exposition and its consummate beauty of expression, he echoes, though somewhat half-heartedly, the great hope of the human race for an individual existence after death. But in scrutinizing his argument closely, we perceive that, while he welcomes with enthusiasm the conception of the *Grand Être*, and states that chimerical being's case with splendid eloquence, he is lost in amazement that humanity ever contained that other idea of a personal immortality; can see no rational excuse for it; fears, indeed, that it is altogether too shadowy to be at all tangible. All he can venture to say in plea for it is that its very audacity favors it, its very wildness is its guarantee. Here, again, we get frank confession, but bad logic. How a faith can be vindicated by its own sheer improbability, how a belief may be true because it goes in the teeth of all experience, I leave for the transcendentalists of free thought to decide. I believe the evolutionists have clearly explained how the notion of life after death "developed" easily out of the first superstitions of the human race, and how its permanence in all communities and most individuals proceeds from the permanence of other instincts seemingly imperishable. But where I join issue with Mr. Frothingham is at the one point where issue is possible — that the idea of immortality is irrational and opposed to common experience; for if it were so, there can be no doubt that it would have been "obliterated" long ago in the process of evolution. It is not because it is preposterous, but because it is probable, that it has kept its strenuous hold on the hearts of mankind. Jesus, in his supreme practical wisdom, in his relentless logic, perceived this fully, perceived that this very idea was the natural, indeed the only, escape from between the horrors of our mundane dilemma. And forthwith (for I hold that this man, whatever his credentials, was scientific or nothing) he proceeded to verification. Opening the human heart, he found that it demanded ampler life on account of the infinite possibilities of love without it. Examining the social organism, he saw that its structure was welded together by the blood of human martyrdom, that every hope and every aspiration within it were based upon the certainty that consciousness, and all its consequent affections, must be permanent, and therefore immaterial. The law of growth was

absolute, the indestructibility of force was sure, and the permanence of force was the certainty of the soul. As for his creed being one of sorrow, that is not strictly true; it is the world that is sorrowful, not the creed that redeems it, which, after all, has never until now had a fair trial. Christianity in its essence, apart from its miraculous pretensions, is, like the mind of its founder, strictly simple and scientific. It may not be feasible, we may be altogether unable to believe it, its history is a long chapter of horrors and enormities, and for some inscrutable reason its priests and paid professors have almost invariably been the enemies of human progress; but, compared with any other creed that has been offered in God's name to men, it has the solitary merit of logical truth and common-sense. If we admit its fundamental proposition, that spiritual personality is permanent, and is at the same time directly conditioned by unselfish love and brotherhood, all the mystery and pain, all the struggle of the ages, becomes clear. Moral salvation, being independent of dogma or of worldly happiness, was as possible for the first half-savage human product as it is possible now for the highest and the meanest of mankind. Knowledge is nothing, power is nothing, material success is nothing; the insight of love is everything, and looks right up into the heaven of heavens, crying, "Oh, grave, where is thy victory? Oh, death, where is thy sting?"

In saying so much, perhaps, concerning one or two points of Mr. Frothingham's teaching, I may seem to be carping at what I came to praise. Let me repeat, then, that the said teaching is in the main as wise as it is beneficent, as beautiful as it is just. For every flower that grows in the gardens of the gods, Mr. Frothingham has reverent admiration; he is Pharisaic to no creed, but tolerant toward all. With his faith in the teaching of science I can find no fault, except that it blinds him now and then to the subtler issues of life and experience; it is, indeed, a kind of faith that must grow in the hearts of all men, and ultimately, I believe, lead to the triumph of the Christian ideal. The star of a holy purpose shines at all times, more or less brightly, through the clouds of the writer's transcendentalism. For with all his scientific leanings he is of the race that produced Emerson and Theodore Parker; he possesses by temperament their vagueness and haziness of logic, leading sometimes to that universal tolerance which makes religion blow neither

hot nor cold, but lukewarm. Mr. Frothingham has done noble work in negating the pretensions of still rampant dogmatisms and special Providences, in asserting the supreme right of private judgment, in bearing testimony from the pulpit that the teachings of science, instead of narrowing, enlarge the heavenly horizons, and in following the divine thread of meaning to be found in all creeds and all theologies. His teaching has the one cardinal defect, that it lacks the consecrating touch of pathos that accompanies the highest kind of spiritual solicitation, which we feel as certainly in the Buddhist books as in the Jewish Testament, in the tragedies of Sophocles as well as in the moralities of John Bunyan, and in the prophesies of Walt Whitman (despite all the Emersonian leaven) as well as in the child-like songs of Whittier. For this is the fatal tendency of transcendentalism—to soften the lines of conviction, and to strain the anguish out of sentiment. There is no pathos in Emerson; never once does his gentle hand, grasping its sooth-sayer's wand, touch the fountain of tears; yet even such a man as Spurgeon can stir that fountain, if only with the mere breath of a phrase. And no creed without pathos will ever justify the great human hope, or conquer the great human heart. So I part from Mr. Frothingham with no lack of respect and admiration, but with some little sadness, feeling that the tale he has to tell is one already twice told, and misses the charm of those fairy stories of God which will continue to add to human happiness, so long as the heart of man is as a child's and some glimpses of a heavenly dream remain.

ROBERT BUCHANAN.